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M. M. Vardy
(p. 12)

Partizan Story

This was their second day in the mountains on the run from the German search party. It was unclear where the Germans's information came from, whether any of the peasants yielded to the German threats, or the competing partisan group of Mikhailovich informed on them, but the pursuers seemed to be better informed than usual. The group was moving mostly in the night on the mountainous terrain with only very brief rest pauses to consume their meager rations. They had only five guns for the eight of them, almost each of a different make, they had two German Wehrmacht carbines, one Schmeisser machine pistol and two British Sten guns, not counting the Mauser pistol of the commander, Jovan. This complicated immensely the ammunition situation, and the bearers of each of the different makes had to carry on themselves as many rounds as possible. Petrica, the medic-nurse, deputy and lover of Jovan, had one of the Sten guns, both because it was the lightest of the machine pistols, and also because she was one of the most experienced fighters. She was on the stocky side, but well proportioned, in her late twenties, with beautiful dark eyes, expressive high cheekboned peasant face, and dark hair worn in a coiled braid under her uniform cap. Two male members of her Serb family had been murdered in the big massacre by the Ustashi, the Croatian fascists. She joined the group upon her escape from the massacre.

The two of the group who still had no guns were Nick and Bundash, the more recent recruits, still under informal probation for their full membership.
Both were Hungarian Jews, Nick around 18, bespectacled, came through the Hungarian border with a group of youth from a Zionist youth movement.

Bundash, an escapee of the Hungarian slave labor camps from the copper mines of Bor, in his mid twenties and stocky, his powerful build still evident despite a year of starvation diet and slave labor. He was a good hearted simple fellow, originally a journeyman mechanic, bursting with a hunger for life's simple pleasures like food and girls, which current historical circumstances thus far had largely denied him. He had the big advantage over Nick of also speaking Serbian, having come originally from the southern part of Hungary which was recently annexed from Yugoslavia by the Hungarian fascist regime. Only lately had he learned that both of his mother and two siblings had been shot by the Hungarian fascist troups and thrown into the Danube with hundred of other Jews of Subotica-Szabadka . He was therefore burning with desire for revenge, to kill German or Hungarian troops, who were also his slave-masters in the mines.

Their only and best chance of acquiring weapons was from enemy troupes killed, - except, that they themselves were more likely to die in that encounter than to kill their enemies. Nick, despite, or perhaps because of his thin frame, also burned with a passion for revenge. He longed for it as a salvation after years of helpless rage against the murderous Nazis. For him the fight would also serve the purpose of restoring his dignity as a Jew and proving himself as a man. He knew that their chances of being killed in the process were great, but he felt no fear of death itself if it had to come in action against the Germans. On the contrary, he considered it one of the best deaths conceivable under the circumstances. As a matter of fact he viewed such death as much preferable to the slow and humiliating torture of the concentration camps, as long as he did not disgrace himself in the fight with the enemy.

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Recently it had also become important for him to prove himself worthy of Petrica's sympathy. To his surprise Nick found himself under her maternal protection. He found no other explanation than that her big heart had a special spot for the underdog, since at this point he was not only the youngest of the group, but also, he felt, the lowest on the totem-pole in terms of his potential contribution to the group's fighting ability. Only later did he learn that there had been a debate about their admission to the group, and that his acceptance was decided by Petritza's vote.
During their hiding periods during the day time she had taught him how to take apart and reassemble her machine pistol, as well as his first sentences of Serbian. Nick had proved a good and eager student in both areas. His admiration for the teacher and his burning wish to deserve her recognition were powerful fuels for his motivation. Her protection was helpful to keep them from being dropped by the group, but it did not increase his popularity in the eyes of the other male members. Besides Petritza, only Jovan, the commander, who also spoke German, viewed him with a certain benevolence. He viewed Nick's fluent German as a potential asset for the group in intelligennce problems and in the interrogation of German prisoners, provided he made quick progress with his Serbian.
At the moment, however, the role of the two was confined to carrying the ammunition box and the meager supplies of the troupe, thus not much more than what their two mules were also accomplishing at a much lesser cost.
Their only hope of escape from this pariah status was the capture of some weapons from killed enemy soldiers. Bundash, who was the proud owner of a substantial pocket knife, was seriously planning to use it to acquire a gun on their next scouting assignment.

Having lived recently in one of the tough working class districts of Budapest where street fighting was an essential survival skill, he knew how to handle his knife and with good luck he stood a chance of succeeding.
Actually, it seemed that B. had enjoyed fighting and had acquired some respect for himself in his tough neighborhood, and not only among the Jewish apprentices. He hinted to Nick at one point that in one of the street-fights he may have knifed one of his opponents to death.
The other side of his personality was as soft as butter. More than once he took over some of Nick's burden, when Nick seemed close to exhaustion during their nightly mountain treks, and brusquely brushed off Nick's lame protests. He seemed to have been brought up by a hard working single mother, with two additional siblings, and whenever B. talked about his mother secret tears welled up in his eyes. The stories about his father seemed vague and contradictory. The only thing that seemed clear was that he disappeared from their lives when B. was about five, and that he had served some time for some reason, and it was not clearly political. According to one of B.'s stories he left for Palestine with an illegal ship, and according to another he may have fought in the International Brigade in the Spanish civil war. It only stood clear that he never again wrote to his family.

The relationship of the two with the rest of the group had warmed somewhat recently, since they had both survived a close brush with death in their last encounter with a German patrol, in which the two passed the test without panicking. After this test of fire, B., with his fluent Serbian came to be viewed as one of them.
Gradually the atmosphere in the group became that of a family, with occasional teasing between the members, but everyone knew that in case of danger he could count on the others as if they were brothers.

They addressed each other as Braty("Brother") in fact, rather than Camerade, as the socialist ideology of the group would have suggested. The easy camaraderie of the group was something he had not experienced before in his life, and he came to crave the group's acceptance more than anything else.

The chances of Nick acquiring a weapon, the ticket to full membership in the group, looked dimmer than those of B., since he had not felt ready and able to kill for it in hand to hand combat, neither physically nor psychologically. The situation, he argued, was quite different when shooting, when you did not see the face of your enemy-victim close up. He did not quite know himself how to defend this aversion of his to killing with his own hands, and he leaned mostly toward the view of Bundash, that under the present circumstances it was nothing but a weakness, a squeamishness they could ill afford. Actually Nick came to envy Bundash for his uncomplicated ability to hate their enemy full-heartedly and without qualifications. It made your life much simpler under the present circumstances. Like shooting from a distance, it allowed you not to see the individual faces of the enemy all too distinctly.

II.
At Headquarters

After about three weeks of seemingly aimless flight and wandering, the group found itself at a higher command center of the partisans, where Jovan's group had been summoned by a special command. Only now did Nick realize that Jovan had been part of the leadership circle of the underground party, known even to the Leader, Josip Tito, Not far from this command post was also a dropping point where British planes would parachute weapons and occasional intelligence personnel.

Despite the great secrecy surrounding guests he managed to meet one of the Palestinians, Peretz, who came as British intelligence officers, with the special additional assignments to infiltrate one of the German occupied countries and try to organize resistance among the Jewish youth. Peretz, with whom he spoke Hebrew, but who also spoke Hungarian, to his enchantment treated the teenager according to Kibutz morality almost as an equal. Through this illustrious connection the impossible happened, he came into the possession of one of the air dropped British machine pistols. This was the equivalent of jumping rank, because the nature of your weapon was the only external insignia of rank in this partisan group.

Not long after this incident happened that Nick came to be employed in the interrogation of a German noncom kidnapped for intelligence purposes by an urban intelligence unit of the partizan organization.

Feldwebel (Staff Sergeant) Schneider, from the signal corps of a Wehrmacht unit in charge of fighting partisans, was lured into a trap by a Croatian girl, Marica, a secret member of one of the political cells of the Communist party supporting the partizans. Nick was first employed as an interpreter, but later came to be entrusted with wining the confidence of the prisoner with the goal of 'turning' him. I.e. to induce him to work secretely for the partizans after his release while continuing to perform his duties in the German army. This turn of events came soon after Nick got to know the prisoner, and realized that he was anything but a diehard Nazi.

The cruel joke of fate was that Schneider could fall for Marica, the girl who delivered him to the partisans, just because he did not believe a word of the Nazi propaganda about the superiority of the Arian race over the Slavic enemies.

Actually, he had seriously jeopardized his security clearance and his relatively safe job by violating the regulations against fraternization.

According to his story, he came from a family around Stuttgart, several of whose members were persecuted by the Nazis immediately after their ascent to power. One of his maternal uncles was in concentration camp for having been a social-democratic state senator. As it happened, some of the details of his allegations could be checked out by another German deserter. He may have passed the Gestapo scrutiny in spite of this family background only with the help of his record as a Hitlerjugend member of good standing.

After his initial suspicion, Nick began trusting Schneider, once he. realized that Sch. was more shattered by his betrayal by his beloved Marica than by the strong prospect of his eventual execution.

Nick's task under the circumstances would have taxed an interrogator with much more skill and life experience. He was supposed to gain the confidence of a prisoner, yet at the same time keep himself emotionally at arm's length from him. But as some of the details of the prisoner's story checked out and he came to believe their veracity, he inadvertently became something like Schneider's advocate before the command in conveying his positive conclusions about the prisoner. Thus inadvertently a certain mutual bond developed between them, which Nick kept fighting like something that may lead him to betray his task and his supposed loyalties.

" Aren't you a moral weakling and a traitor to feel sympathy for a man who belongs to the enemy, while your kind are being murdered by them daily in the concentrations camps? Where is your vow of revenge?" he would berate himself. "

-"But is he really the enemy Isn't he just the victim of forces beyond his control against his will as much as you are? Don't we have to judge every man individually according to his merits?"

"Even I was a moral wreckling and a threat to [illegible] society. I'm a man who believes in the enemy, while your kind are being murdered by them daily in the courtroom rooms empty." Where is your vow of courage?" he would berate himself. "But it be really the enemy. Isn't he just the victim of [illegible] control system as well as much as you are? Don't we have to judge every man individually according to his worth?"

Despite Nicks valiant resistance to these feelings, the interrogator and the prisoner grew inexorably closer to each other by the simple fact of proximity. In their relative isolation they communicated with each other more than with anyone else.

Eventually, the contact with the prisoner seemed to yield results. After a couple of visits by his girl friend, Marica, Schneider was already considering working for the partizans after his release, if the details of his liberation could be made plausible enough for his unit to accept him back without suspicion.
With Nick's aid, a staged escape of Schneider was agreed upon to be kept secret even from the guards out of fear of possible German spies in their midst.

That is when it happened that the German authorities have decided to hang publicly two of the hostages in their hands as a response to a daring attack of an urban partizan unit upon a German army officers' mess hall. The logic of the fight for the respect and fear of the population required that the partizans respond with the publicized execution of some Germans.
That was the situation that lead to the suggestion to use Schneider as one of the two to be exemplarily executed, one of the only two live Germans at that time in partizan hands
Unfortunately for Schneider, Jovan, whose idea it had originally been to turn Schneider, and who was also in charge of the interrogation, had been sent to Zagreb on an assignment. The command needed someone to pose as an officer of the Wehrmacht, and his blond hair, tall dashing figure, self confidence and good German made him a natural for this assignment.
Nick had been sent at the same time with his squad to a relatively easy mission to secure and intercept a British airdrop of weapons and intelligence personnel.

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III

Spring was in the air when the small detachment moved out for its nightly assignment. The crowns of the trees in the forest were by now almost full as the small group proceeded silently on the barely visible path toward the designated clearance. In order to safeguard against possible leaks, nobody in the group except the squad leader, Branko, knew the exact location of the airdrop. The men carried heavy torchlights and a canister of carosene with some empty conserve cans which filled and lit were to mark the drop area for the aircraft. There had to be a delicate balance between the need for visibility from above and the need to escape notice by the enemy.

Nick, who had a special love for forests since his childhood, was savoring the fragrances of the spring night. He was trying to fill his lungs with them as if to store them for later.

Because of the importance of the mission, and also because fresh supplies were expected from the airdrop, they were supplied generously with ammunition for this operation They also had two mules with them for the cargo.

Nick was thinking of their hostage. Would Jovan be back in time to prevent the execution of Schneider? He had learned recently, that Jovan was to serve as a member of a team negotiating the withdrawal of the German troops from Yugoslavia under a safe conduct agreement. This would have saved the German's the equally bleak prospects of falling either into the hands either of the partisans or to that of the

advancing Russian armies. Such an agreement would at the same time also save the partizans further bloodshed.
They reached the clearance safely, and just ten minutes before the designated drop time started setting up their signals for the plane.
Moments later they heard the hum of the motors of the plane and shortly thereafter two white parachutes came floating down in the moonlight.

Nick had just taken up position next to Bundash behind a thick tree at the perimeter of the clearance, when an illumination rocket suddenly exploded lighting the dark sky like a Christmas tree. They felt exposed as if by a spotlight on a stage. Before anybody could react a hail of machinegun fire pierced the silence of the forest. It became obvious that they fell had fallen into a German ambush.
Nick saw two shadowy silhouettes with steel helmets. A strange calm fell over him, and he took aim at the figures as in a training exercise, slowly pulling the trigger of his gun in order not to move its barrel from his aim. The two figures fell like shadows on the screen of a Chinese shadow theater.
Having to concentrate on the immediate task helped to divert Nick's attention from the sheer hopelessness of their situation. They were surrounded and outgunned by the enemy, and one parachutist had already been downed from the sky by their bullets. Suddenly he felt a light hit at the back of his head, a loud explosion after which everything fell quiet.

Bundash, before joining the feverish flight through the forest still managed to rescue the valuable gun of his dead friend. When they eventually regrouped at the commando post they looked at each other surprised that they had survived the debacle with only two casualties, Nick and one of the parachutists.

IV

In his cave prison Schneider noticed that there was change in the air. He was worried already by the cessation of Nick's visits, who served as his main bridge to the outside world. He had brought him news from the outside world as he heard them on the BBC. He knew that the war must be nearing its end since the Russian armies had surrounded and bombarded Berlin, and the Western Allies were also advancing rapidly in Germany from the West.

The most worrisome news he got during Marica's last visit. When she also brought him some German books, she told Schneider that the German command had again executed hostages. He knew that the logic of the situation required retribution by the partizans, but he tried to repress the possible implication for his own fate.

"They can not possibly treat me as an enemy any more!" Since his agreement with Jovan and Nick he viewed himself as an ally whose release was only a matter of logistics.

"It boggles the mind", -fumed Schneider, "what those generals in the local German command were thinking, if they thought at all. The war is lost and that there will be accounting for such acts?"

"There seems to be some kind of inertia in their thinking", he reasoned. "In their minds the state of war with its senseless killing, to which these professional soldiers had adjusted so well, must be the normal state of affairs. They seem to be dreading the approaching end of the war, as a threatening unknown for which they knew no precedents."

Schneider had gotten used to the preferential treatment of semi liberty that he had received since the order of Jovan, and the sudden tightening of the discipline in his cave-prison shocked and frightened him. The guard with whom he had become on almost comradely terms, suddenly insisted that the door to the latrine be left open

while he was using it. He felt personally hurt by these measures of apparent mistrust, and saw in them a breach of confidence.

The decision to execute Schneider was reached by a district commander Bogdanovitsh, a former officer in the royalist Mikhailovitsh group turned Titoist, who was ignorant about the arrangements worked out by Jovan and Nick.
Besides that, Bogdanovitsh seemed to have had the same problem adjusting to the coming peace as the German middle level brass had.
According to Schneider's guard, who had developed a certain comraderie with him and who was with him to the bitter end, Sch. was so totally stunned by this unexpected turn of affairs that he didn't even try to protest it.
His request, at least to see his girl friend, Marica, before his death, couldn't be fulfilled either; a curfew of the German command imposed on the inhabitants made her travel to the forest-post impossible.
The execution was carried out by a squad of partizans who did not know Sch., upon a couple of hour's notice to the prisoner. According to his guard, Schneider walked to his execution like a sleepwalker, as if totally oblivious of what was happening to him.